Family Involvement

Twenty-first Century Community Learning Centers (21st CCLC) programs need family involvement for many reasons. First, the family is each student's most immediate community, whether the child is living with one or both parents, or with some other relative or caregiver.

Second, community learning centers strive to be community hubs that engage children, youth and adults in activities that both educate and enrich their lives. Third, students do better in school when their families are involved. Research has shown family involvement relates to improved student grades and test scores across different student groups, including at-risk students. Higher levels of family involvement also correspond to lower dropout rates and to increased student sense of per- sonal competence, engagement in school work, and beliefs in the importance of education (Hoover- Dempsey et al., 2005; Kakli, Kreider, Little, Buck, & Coffey, 2006; NEA & MALDEF, 2010; Nye, Turner, & Schwartz, 2006).

Even though students benefit when families are involved in their children's education, involv- ing families in 21st CCLC programs can be a big challenge for many reasons. Many of these reasons relate to the multiple issues facing the families of children who attend low-performing schools. Some children are raised by a caregiver other than a parent, perhaps a grandparent or an aunt. Parents sometimes work more than one job, work in the evening or lack transportation (Weiss & Brigham, 2003), factors that make attending events difficult. Many immigrant fam- ily members do not speak English and are unfa- miliar with the American school system. These parents, because of their cultural backgrounds, feel schools are mainly responsible for educating students. They are reluctant to speak with school staff because of their limited English skills and fears that they might be seen as ignorant (Chrispeels & Rivero, 2001). They also don't understand the things they could do at home to support their children's learning.

The Good News for Family Involvement

There is positive news for 21st CCLC programs seeking to support families and increase their involvement in program activities. Building family involvement starts with understanding that caregivers want their children to succeed in school. Caregivers, in this case, can be parents or extended family members like a grandparent, aunt or uncle who is raising a child. Sometimes, there is a tendency to interpret lack of family involvement as a sign that parents don't care. Such is rarely the case (King & Goodwin, 2002; The After-School Corporation, n.d.).

When working to create strong family involve- ment, it helps to understand some basic prin- ciples related to two areas: the kinds of condi- tions that encourage parents to be a part of your program and the different types of activities that your program can offer to benefit parents and families.

The Building Blocks of Family Involvement

When we consider family involvement and creating 21st CCLC programs that attract

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parents, it is important to understand four key and interrelated building blocks: building relationships with parents and caregivers, creating an environment where parents feel welcome, communicating regularly with parents, and understanding the cultures of the families. Understanding each of these areas and how they help to embrace families will help you to develop a program where families are highly involved in multiple ways.

Building Relationships With Families

Building relationships with families takes time, intentional effort and understanding of some key elements. Research offers pointers to several factors that encourage family members to get involved: understanding their role in educa- tion, believing what they do has an impact, and feeling invited to participate with schools and programs.

Kathleen Hoover-Dempsey and her colleagues (2005) noted how caregiver involvement relates to beliefs about how children grow and develop, which in turn influence the caregivers' understanding of what they can do at home to support children's success in school. When parents are not involved, it is often because they believe their role to be limited, which may not be consistent with program expectations (King & Goodwin, 2002). Some immigrant parents believe education is the school's sphere of influence, and they must defer to the school as they would in their home countries. Many parents, particularly those with low levels of education or limited English language skills, do not realize the steps they can take to support their children's learning beyond telling them to do their homework. Fortunately, research has shown that parent education programs may effectively address parents' beliefs and under- standing. Programs that provide information to caregivers about how to interact with school and afterschool staff and how to support learn- ing at home can increase family involvement (Chrispeels & Rivero, 2001).

Invitations to be involved in a child's education are very important, perhaps more important than either a parent's perception of their role in a child's education or feelings of being able to make a difference (Ferguson, Jordan, & Baldwin, 2010; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005). Invitations can come from a child, a teacher, an activity leader or staff member, or just from how welcome the parent feels at a school or program. Invitations to involvement can be the key to motivating a parent to come to a pro- gram activity, particularly when their own child invites them.

Communicating With Families

As an important element in the relationship-building process, communication serves as the bridge between your 21st CCLC program and the families you want to engage (Kakli et al., 2006). It also helps build trust with families. Effective communication might be formal, such as written notices that students take home to inform parents about upcoming activities. Also, bridges could be built at scheduled events for parents and their children. In both of these instances, a fixed structure shapes your interac- tions with parents. Surveying families to learn of their interests and to obtain their feedback is

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another way to formally engage with parents (King & Goodwin, 2002; Kakli et al., 2006).

Informal communication with family members may also be very effective for involving parents with a 21st CCLC program (Weiss & Brigham, 2003). Many parents regularly come to the program to pick up their children at the end of an afternoon. This may be an excellent time to engage parents in a relaxed, informal way, and a friendly greeting may go a long way to conveying to a parent you are happy they are there. Then it's also possible to talk with parents about a child's progress, events at home that are affecting a student, or family needs that your program can support. Telephone calls and visits to homes are other effective ways of engaging families (Weiss & Brigham, 2003), especially those that may be harder to reach. Informal ways of communicating with families may set the stage for a caregiver to participate in pro- gram-sponsored activities.

Creating a Welcoming Environment

Families are much more likely to want to be a part of your program when they feel welcome and valued (The After-School Corporation, n.d.). There are four, often interconnected, com- ponents that can help your program convey to parents that they are welcome at the center:

- Physical environment
- Program practices and policies
- Interactions with family members
- Written materials and communication

Physical environment. Welcoming programs do many things to visually tell parents that you are happy they are there. You can convey this message through simple things like putting up a welcome sign and by providing clear directions to the center or school office. A clean, well-lit facility also presents a friendly face. Some 21st CCLC programs have a specific family area or room with displays of information of interest to parents and couches where parents can be comfortable (King & Goodwin, 2002).

Program policies and practices. Your pro- gram's policies and practices also help to create a welcoming place for families. Get together with your staff to consider whether you have established routine ways of communicating and reaching out to parents. For instance, do you give all families a welcome packet that explains program procedures and key information — such as contact information for the program director or site coordinator?

Personal interaction. This area relates closely to communication with families. Welcoming programs pay attention to the ways they inter- act with visitors. Ideally, program staff mem- bers greet family members rather than ignor- ing them. Sites with many families who have limited English skills should have staff members who are able to speak with these families in their home languages — another way to make these families feel included and appreciated (NEA & MALDEF, 2010).

Written materials and communication. Written materials also contribute to the overall impression your community learning center makes (Weiss & Brigham, 2003).

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Printed communications such as letters and brochures should have an inviting layout. Be sure they are clearly written and free of misspelled words, grammatical errors and jargon that a parent might not understand. Make a point of pro- viding translated materials when you distrib- ute information to families who do not speak English (NEA & MALDEF, 2010).

Understanding Family Culture

21st Century Community Learning Centers serve students and families from multiple ethnic groups, and many families may speak a language other than English at home. These families may have limited resources, and your students may attend low-performing schools in low-income areas. Given the many different backgrounds of students and their families, it is important that your program staff understand the students' cultures (King & Goodwin, 2002; NEA & MALDEF, 2010). This understanding helps your staff relate to the issues families face and the perspectives that shape how families participate in and view the program. Hiring staff members who represent the diversity of the families you serve helps you to better con- nect with families (Kakli et al., 2006; NEA & MALDEF, 2010).

Parents and students feel more comfortable when they see program staff members who are like them and who understand the issues they face. These staff members bring sensitivity to their work that helps them easily form relation- ships with parents. Sometimes it is helpful for centers to bridge the cultural divide by drawing on parents' knowledge and skills when train- ing staff (NEA & MALDEF, 2010). As noted earlier, culturally sensitive programs provide materials in languages and formats that their families understand. These programs also find ways to incorporate families' cultures into their activities. They do this by creating opportuni- ties for families to display their heritage through food, music, dance or other forms of cultural expression that honor and celebrate the community's diversity.

Types of Family Involvement

Family involvement comes in many shapes and sizes. Henderson (2007) authored a classic book on the subject of family/school partnerships, Beyond the Bake Sale. The book's title conveys
the notion that family involvement is not just one kind of activity. In fact, researchers at the Harvard Family Research Project (Caspe, Traub, & Little, 2002) note the value of thinking of four dimensions of family involvement. These dimensions emerged from the Project's review of evaluations of out-of-school time programs, and from interviews and online discussions with key informants and out-of-school professionals. The dimensions remind us of the many ways to involve families and cover activities designed to help parents and caregivers become connected
in these ways:

- Develop their own skills and talents
- Engage in fun and educational task with their children
- Develop their governance and leader- ship skills

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- Connect to schools and community resources

Adult Development Activities

Adult development activities focus on parents and caregivers. These activities strive to boost the ability of adults to support their children's learning and their own development. These activities include parenting and English lan- guage classes, GED preparation, job training and family literacy programs.

Parent and Child Shared Activities

21st CCLC programs offer many experiences where parents and their children can share fun and educational activities. These activities edu- cate both generations while increasing oppor- tunities for them to communicate and share experiences. Examples include family nights, field trips to community attractions, weekend activities, and opportunities for children to show projects they've created or to perform for their families.

Governance and Leadership Activities

Family involvement activities related to gover- nance and leadership offer avenues for families to have a voice in 21st CCLC programs while drawing on their interests and desire to be more deeply involved with the program (Kakli et al., 2006; Weiss & Brigham, 2003). For example, parents and caregivers may serve on a program advisory board. The program benefits from the community connections that parents bring to the decision making process as they raise issues that are important to them. Centers might offer training supports that build the leadership skills of caregivers (NEA & MALDEF, 2010). Centers might also invite parents and caregivers to volunteer to help with administrative tasks, serve as liaisons to other parents, or lead activi- ties for children or adults (The After-School Corporation, n.d.). These kinds of volunteer supports increase the resources available to a program and make excellent use of both the expertise and enthusiasm of parents. Having family members in leadership roles creates a valuable bridge from the program to the local community, as parents and caregivers take their experiences to other community members and build support for the program.

School and Community Linking Activities

21st CCLC programs have an excellent start- ing point for linking parents and caregivers to the schools that students attend and to the resources available in the community (Weiss & Brigham, 2003). Because each program is associated with a school, it can help with forging stronger connections between parents and the school, especially when the program is hosted by the school (Kakli et al., 2006). Strengthening these connections is especially important with two groups: parents who are wary of schools because of their own experiences growing up and immigrant parents who do not understand the role that American schools expect parents to play. Your program can help educate parents about school policies and ways to partner with the school to support their children. Collaborating with schools for this task also provides an excellent way for your program to create stronger links to the school(s) you serve (King & Goodwin, 2002).

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Afterschool programs can provide important family support when their activities connect families to community services (The After-School Corporation, n.d.). Some ways to fulfill this role include sponsoring a service fair where community agencies and families can meet to learn about services or hosting an on-site health clinic to provide care for children and families. Actions that require less effort and coordination might involve simply making information from community nonprofits available in a parent room or on a bulletin board. Another option is providing information about community services to family members when they pick up their children.

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